

How much do you like being wrong?

We can only speculate about how Saul of Tarsus felt in the days following his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. We tend to think of Saul’s conversion in immediate terms; one moment he’s Saul the Christian hunter, the next he’s the Super Saint. And to be sure, coming face to face with the resurrected Jesus utterly changed him. But I have to think that mixed in with the shock and amazement was an almost sickening realization that his entire view of the world had been wrong.

It seems to be a very quiet Saul that we see early in Acts chapter nine, silently processing what had just happened to him. His way of understanding and functioning within his world had been wrong. His notion of what was pleasing to God had been wrong. As if to underscore just how wrong he had been, God blinded him for three days. It was like God saying: “This is what you were, Saul—blind to the truth.” Adding insult to injury, Saul was depending on the help of a Christian—the type of person that he had been trying to eliminate. Saul had a lot to think about as he sat in that house on Straight Street. He had to find out how wrong he had been before he could do anything right. It was a painful process—he wasn’t in the mood to eat or drink for those three days—but it was a necessary process. As a rule, we try to avoid suffering, but it is often suffering that forces us to grow; and pain that forces us to change.

As far as the Christian Calendar is concerned, it is still the Easter season, and the story of Saul’s turnaround is a dramatic example of Easter in action, for it is nothing less than a conversation with the living Lord Jesus that shook the foundations of Saul’s life. It was an audience with Jesus, once dead and now very much alive, that caused Saul to switch. Saul’s conversion is great circumstantial evidence for the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. Why else would someone like Saul change so completely? He had nothing to gain by following Jesus, and had far more to lose. He had been thoroughly convinced that he was doing the right thing until the risen Jesus appeared to him. Something new was about to blossom in Saul. Because of his contact with the Jesus of Easter, a new person was about to emerge from the old. Saul was getting a second chance.

It is at this point that we meet Ananias, who is one of those great saints of Scripture who makes up the supporting cast of God’s salvation plan. A Christian living in Damascus, he is contacted directly by the Lord and told to go minister to Saul of Tarsus, who is in a house on Straight Street. Ananias offers up some mild protest, but then the Lord reveals His thoughts regarding Saul’s second chance: He says, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” To his credit, Ananias goes and finds the man who had been one of the most intimidating enemies of the faith. All sorts of thoughts and feelings must’ve swirled through Ananias as he drew close to the man who had relished binding Christians and throwing them in prison to await execution. But Ananias speaks only words of grace, saying, “Brother Saul”—just think of it, Brother Saul—“the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately

his vision is restored— his entire way of seeing the world is remade as he is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Now his second chance had really begun, and Saul made the most of it.

Saul had to see how wrong he had been before he could do anything right. He endured those dark days, and now, because of the mercy of the very Savior he had been persecuting, he was a new person. He was baptized into the Christian faith—the faith that held Jesus to be the Son of the Father; the true and greatest Passover Lamb; the Messiah from David’s family tree. Saul spent some time in the company of the Damascus Christians, and can you imagine what those conversations must have been like? Saul had been given a second chance, and he wasted no time in doing his first Christian preaching there in the Damascus synagogues. According to verse 22, Saul confounded the Jews in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. To confound means to perplex, amaze, bewilder, or stun. Saul would continue confounding his world with the cross of Christ Jesus as his message and a Christ-like life as his letter to the world. The gospel of Jesus to this day continues to confound, perplex, amaze, bewilder, stun—and save people.

If you can admit where you’ve been wrong, God can give you a second chance. His forgiveness is full, complete, and total. His love for you is unconditional. This is the source of deep spiritual strength. It is a different type of strength than we’re used to. From a Biblical perspective, spiritual strength is a matter of relying on someone else—of leaning into and depending on someone besides yourself. Typically, we think of strength as something I have to have. If I want to be physically strong, I have to exercise and lift weights, for example. But spiritual strength is different; it is a shift of focus away from self and onto God, and those who make that shift experience something like Saul did. The way you see everything is remade.

I mention this in part because 3 out the 4 Bible verses chosen by our confirmands for today directly mention the subject of strength. We have Nehemiah 8: 10, “And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Psalm 46: 1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” And Philippians 2:13, though it doesn’t use the word itself, talks about the source of strength when it says, “...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” I think it is worth considering that our young people have identified the need for spiritual strength, and have chosen verses that locate such strength in God. What a great thing to have in mind as they stand before you today and confirm their baptismal faith. What a great thing to carry into the next stage of life. You can withstand the storms of life, and the good times are made even better, when you shift your focus away from self and onto God. He is perfectly dependable; perfectly loving; perfectly wise and strong; He is the God of second chances. Trust Him and you’ll have the strength you need.